

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 236 608

CS 207 587

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TITLE A Way To Define.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 2p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)
-- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Exercise Exchange; v26 n2 pl4-15 Spr 1982
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English; *Definitions; Essays; Higher Education; Learning Activities; Paragraph Composition; Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Exercises
IDENTIFIERS PF Project

ABSTRACT

THE FOLLOWING IS THE FULL TEXT OF THIS DOCUMENT:
LEVEL: College. AUTHOR'S COMMENT: When I first began as a college composition instructor, I gave a standard explanation that definition was necessary if students wished to argue logically or to explain an unfamiliar subject. I showed examples of definitions, discussed ones in the text, and then sent my students home to write a definition. Not surprisingly, the resulting essays were disasters. In despair, I considered not requiring definition essays at all, but one thing prevented my doing this: re-written definition essays were usually much improved. Therefore, it was logical to assume that students could write a definition once they knew how not to write one. Finally a possible solution presented itself. If a word or a concept can be defined through a variety of ways as my lectures had asserted, it should be possible to use each way separately and then to combine them to create an extended definition. Such an approach would have two distinct advantages. First, each assignment would be graded, but each would be only a paragraph and would be building towards a finished definition, thus indicating my positive belief that students can write definitions. Such a technique also would have the advantage of reinforcing the different types of definitions and their importance in composition as well as the other techniques, such as transitions, needed to make a complete essay. THE APPROACH: We begin definition with the standard lecture, sample essays, and discussion, but the writing assignment is actually a three part one. First, students, having chosen a subject such as cigarette smokers, write a paragraph of classification in which they narrow to one class, giving a specific and concrete example of that class. Then, they write a paragraph of analysis on the narrowed class from the first assignment. Finally, they choose to do a paragraph of word origin or a descriptive definition. This final paragraph becomes the introduction or the conclusion for the extended definition, combining classification and analysis with transitions and thesis statement for a final essay. With the topic of the smoker, one student classified smokers as chain, moderate, and light smokers with an example of a chain smoker. The next paragraph gave a process analysis of the chain smoker's procedure in smoking, and the final essay included a word origin of "smoker" and "chain." While not a magic panacea, this approach seems to be working for most of my students. I have not received any Pulitzer Prize winning essays, but I have received extended definitions--at last. (Author)

Charles R. Duke

A Way to Define

Sallyanne H. Fitzgerald, University of Missouri—St. Louis

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